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Portsmouth, New Hampshire Memorializes 18th Century African Burying Ground

By Valerie Cunningham

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In October 2003, contractors carrying out infrastructure upgrades near the intersection of Court and Chestnut Streets in downtown Portsmouth, New Hampshire unearthed fragments of wood coffins. Under the direction of the state archaeologist, a total of 13 coffins were identified at the excavated site and eight were temporarily removed. Archaeological, historical and scientific protocols were

followed throughout this process and a team of researchers analyzed the historic records, artifacts and skeletal remains, as well as DNA samples. The findings of the combined research confirmed that this site was the "Negro Burying Ground" as shown on a 1705 city map.

This segregated colonial-era burying place for Africans was located in what was then an undeveloped area on the outskirts of town. As residential Portsmouth expanded during the 1790s, the burying ground was subsumed into the urban landscape where as many as 200 graves may still lie.

Revelation of the burying ground has distinction as the earliest documented African-American cemetery in New England. The memorial brings attention to nearly 400 years of black history in New Hampshire, from the first recorded arrival of an African in 1645 to the modern Civil Rights Movement. The African Burying Ground always has been a focal point of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail linking 24 sites around the city that tell stories of its African people.

To determine how best to honor those unmarked and unidentified graves beneath Chestnut Street, the mayor appointed a blue ribbon committee, chaired by Vernis Jackson, founder and president of the Seacoast African American Cultural Center. The African Burying Ground Committee met with owners of property adjacent to the city's excavated site and agreed that Chestnut Street

should be closed to through traffic and that a memorial park would be created at the site.

The city contracted Woodburn and Company, to assist the African Burying Ground Committee with the landscape design of a memorial park. The location presents particularly complex design challenges because of the sloping topography, the need to allow access to private property and, especially, because additional human remains is known to be buried there at very shallow depths.

The committee reached out to the community during the design process via a series of public forums and, following a national search, added artist and sculptor Jerome Meadows of Meadowlark Studios in Savannah, Georgia, to the design team.

The design phase concluded in 2009 when the mayor and Portsmouth City Council endorsed the African Burying Ground Committee's recommended design, entitled "We Stand in Honor of Those Forgotten." The roughly 6,500-square foot African Burying Ground Memorial Park includes sculptural pieces, historical information, granite seating walls, landscaping and pedestrian scale lighting. A community plaza will feature decorative tiles to be made by local schoolchildren under the direction of artist Meadows.

A timeline embedded in the park's cobbled walkway will reference the 20 African men from Portsmouth households who petitioned the New Hampshire legislature, unsuccessfully, for their freedom in 1779. The remains of the eight individuals exhumed when the burying ground was accidentally disturbed will be re-interred in the meditation area of the park. Their sealed vault will be marked with the West African sankofa symbol which means "to learn from the past."

The African Burying Ground Committee has begun what is expected to be an 18-month fundraising campaign for the \$1.2 million project. The Portsmouth City Council has allocated \$100,000 in Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) funds toward development of the memorial park. UDAG funds are non-property-tax dollars, which are typically used for community enhancement and economic development projects.

At the request of the African Burying Ground Committee, the city council has also established the African Burying Ground Trust Fund, managed by Art-Speak, the city's non-profit cultural commission. The trust fund will serve as a repository to receive tax-deductible contributions for the construction and maintenance of the African Burying Ground Memorial Park.

Valerie Cunningham is founder of the Portsmouth Black Heritage Trail and a member of the mayor's African Burying Ground Committee.